WHITE DRAGON RISING

THE ARTHURIAN EMPIRE'S DARKEST HOUR

BOOK TWO OF THE ARTHURIAN EMPIRE

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White Dragon Rising: The Arthurian Empire's Darkest Hour

By Matthew Gordon MacNeil

Chapter 1: The Challenge of Succession

In 585 Arthur Pendragon, King of Britain and Emperor of Rome, was killed in battle against his nephew Mordred and his eldest son and heir, Amhar.

His death sent shockwaves throughout his Empire which covered most of Europe, the Middle East, and large swathes of North America. It sent many into a panic and left the nobles of this vast realm wondering how they could defend it from the threats making themselves known.

One such threat was the Saxons and other Germanic tribes. Long ago defeated decisively at the Battle of Badon Hill and again at Camlann, several Chieftains and Kings saw Arthur's death as a new beginning, a new era of plunder and conquest.

To make matters worse, none of Arthur's remaining sons wanted the crown. It was, they believed, just too much responsibility for one man to handle and so declined it, preferring to take up military positions under whoever would be chosen as the new King and Emperor.

Due to this, the nobles of Britain chose Merlin, the wisest among them and Arthur's closest friend, to act as regnant until they could determine a successor.

Merlin, now ninety six, was tired of State life, spending his days writing his histories of Arthur and seeing to the education of his students (he ran a Druidic academy on the Isle of Anglesey, his best student being a Gaullish woman named Melissa, who would one day become a famed Sorceress in her own right), but understood his duty and returned to Loegria to act as the Empire's interim ruler.

Joining him in this task was Melehan, the eldest son of Mordred who, knowing nothing of his father's rebellion (or so he claimed) was left untouched in the aftermath and allowed to stay by Merlin's side.

Among the first tasks Merlin took on was the Saxon raids. Reports came to Camelot of Saxon raids into the province of Gaul and the regnant quickly gathered a force together to relieve it.

But Gaul wasn't the only part of the Empire feeling the blade of the Germanic warriors in the months following Arthur's death, Britain herself was suffering.

Saxon war bands, acting much like their Viking cousins would in later centuries, came ashore in lightning fast raids, strike a village or monastery, and then return to the sea as if they've never been there.

Merlin, taking the rather elegant sounding title Count of Britain, did what he could here as well, ordering all mayors, village Chieftains, and military officers to assemble militias to defend against these attacks.

One of the most resourceful Commanders in these operations was Lancelot who, despite being elderly, still had the energy of a young man, and from Bamburgh Castle in Northern Britain he rallied a well trained defense force, destroying

several Saxon war parties unlucky enough to come ashore in his territory.

This success did help Merlin in the short term, but soon enough, by winter, things were looking serious again.

Most provinces of the Empire were peaceful, things going on as they had before under Arthur, but Gaul and Britain remained threatened by Germanic tribes eager to bring it down, and all they needed to do was conquer Britain itself and the Empire would crumble.

And there still was no successor for the throne, which is rather odd when one considers Brutus, the founder of the British Kingdom, had hundreds of descendants by this time, and the Pendragon dynasty had a number of suitable men as well, but most did not want it, preferring, like Arthur's sons, to take up Generalships instead.

Merlin himself was vouched for at one point by Thomas, one of Arthur's middle sons, but he declined immediately, pointing out his extreme age and the lack of a male heir (his daughter, Inogen, was off in Armorica studying to be a Druidess and was not remotely interested in being Queen and Empress one day). Thus, the succession continued to be disputed.

By the spring of 586 Gaul was facing a massive Germanic invasion and so the Count of Britain sent more legions to

safeguard the province, leaving his own lands diminished in manpower.

As he and Melehan watched the ships depart on the coast of what is now Dorset, Merlin was apprehensive, worrying about the state of the Empire, but most of all he was worried he wasn't doing enough to keep his cousin's realm intact.

The only good thing happening at the time was that there was finally to be a meeting to choose a successor, Merlin attending after he saw off the legionaries.

Nobles from all over Britain were going, every one a descendant iof Brutus, the single criteria needed to take up the British Crown now that no son of Arthur wanted it.

Among the most promising to Merlin was Constantine Pendragon, the young son of Cador, nephew of Arthur, and King of Cornwall.

A brave warrior who fought under his father and uncle during Mordred and Amhar's rebellion, Constantine also had compassion for the poor, those of different religions and ethnic backgrounds, all vital to being Emperor of such a big realm.

But, most important in Merlin's estimation, Constantine loved the Empire his uncle and his men built and wanted to see it continue to flourish.

Once the ships were out of sight Merlin and Melehan mounted their horses and rode towards York where the council was to be held.

Along their way North the Count and his apprentice came across several wagons of farmers escaping south, scared off their farms by rumours of a large Saxon invasion.

One man in particular caught Merlin's eye, for he beat his slaves near death trying to get them to move faster.

Merlin ordered Melehan to strike the man down, not a killing blow, but one meant to knock the wind out of him so he'd know what it felt like to be a slave.

Melehan, masking a rather cruel personality under his innocent smile, hopped off his horse, brandished his sword towards the man, making it seem as though he was about to kill him.

The man cried out, terrified at what he thought would be his last moments, only to have the hilt of Melehan's sword ram into his chest, knocking him on his ass.

Merlin advised the man to treat his slaves with kindness or, better yet, to set them free. He warned him in no uncertain terms that, should their paths cross again and he acted the same way, he'd have his head.

On the spot the man released his slaves and frantically made

his getaway, Merlin and Melehan moving on once they received the thanks of the slaves.

The two rode on, unaware that, a day or so before, a Saxon war band made landfall on what is now the Yorkshire coast, a hundred strong.

This war band, led by an unnamed Chieftain, raided several farms already, killing twenty people and taking five to sell as slaves back in Germania.

At York Constantine prepared to lead a band of his best Cornish Knights but was being hounded by other nobles to wait for the Count, that it was unlawful to mount an offensive without his say so.

Luckily for him (and for the common people), Merlin arrived a day later, immediately being brought up to speed on the Saxon raiders.

The city of York, long ago established by Ebraucus, the great grandson of Brutus and King of Britain, was a beautiful jewel in Britain's crown.

Marble stone buildings, bustling streets filled with merchants of various kinds from across the known world. Its people a mixture of different races and ethnicities, some born in Britain, others immigrants. It was, like Camelot and London, a diverse place, rich in culture and architecture.

Merlin and Melehan were brought to the villa of the old Roman governor where the nobles gathered. Here was Aidan Mac Gabran, King of Scotland, Rhun ap Howal, King of Wales, and of course Constantine Pendragon, King of Cornwall.

The three Kings were joined by Lancelot and his brother Lionel and Lancelot's son Galahad, a young Knight who, like Constantine, fought at Camlann.

Other nobles also joined them including Arthur's nephews Gareth, Gahereis, and Agravaine, brothers to the rebel Mordred. Senior members of the Round Table, these men came to help decide the next King and Emperor if needed.

None, like their cousins, wanted the throne themselves, content with serving as Knights, and good and loyal Knights they were.

Melora, one of Arthur's eldest children, was also present, as was her husband Orlando, a Greek Prince who served as a Knight of the Round Table.

Several of Arthur's sons, Thomas, Kyden, Patrick, Morgan, and Mervin came, as did Madoc and Gormant, the last surviving brothers of Arthur.

The first order of business in the villa was to hold a ceremony to honour both the Christian God and the Old Gods, Merlin wanting to get all the blessings he could for the new monarch.

Such 'mixed' religious rituals weren't uncommon in the Arthurian Empire, which had understood the Roman concept of accepting and even encouraging diverse religious beliefs. So long as the people stayed loyal to the Emperor or whoever stood in his place, they could believe and worship whatever God they wished.

Once it was concluded those assembled got down to business, and they spent hours at the task. They debated the merits of each of the Kings present.

Aidan was a pious man, with a skilled sword arm. He was also a descendant of the Pendragon dynasty, being descended from the founder Magnus Maximus Pendragon through his mother Luan.

Rhun was a good fighter and had a good head for politics. As a boy he studied in Rome during Italia's first years as part of Arthur's Empire, becoming just as much Roman as he was a Briton.

However, he was arrogant and cocky, things that put Merlin off choosing him.

Constantine, a man of few words who didn't speak much during this meeting, was brought back to the center of the conversation again and again by the Count, obvious he favored him as the best choice.

In the corner of the villa Melehan listened, not saying much, his eyes hard on Merlin, the old man's hollow voice beginning to grate on his nerves.

For a long time, too long in his opinion, he served his elder cousin without complaint. He was the ideal apprentice, as his late father attested he would be.

But here, in front of dozens of people, he watched as his Master never even looked at him, never even brought him into the circle of talking men.

Him! A great grandson of Uther Pendragon, a descendant of Brutus like the rest. Why was he not brought into the circle? Why was he not considered as heir to the throne?

Despite these claims not to understand, he knew why all too well.

His father was a rebel. A traitor, and so it cast doubt on him and his younger brother Melou, even though his brother was far away in Norway with their mother and was no threat.

Feeling this way, he knew better than to speak his mind, knowing he would only incriminate himself and lend credence to the idea his whole family couldn't be trusted.

By the fifth hour all talk had ceased. All minds agreed.

Constantine Pendragon was to be Britain's next King and

Rome's next Emperor. He was twenty.

From the accounts of the meeting, recorded by Merlin afterward, Constantine accepted his appointment without much excitement or fear. It simply was to him.

Everyone congratulated him, shaking his hand or patting him on the back. Gareth said Arthur would be proud to have him as his heir, to which Constantine said he hoped so.

Then the matter turned to the Saxon raiding party, the new Emperor to be wanting to ride out to crush it, to which Merlin reluctantly agreed.

Gathering two hundred Knights under him Constantine rode out of York into the countryside, Red Dragon banner being held by Galahad who accompanied him.

They found the Saxons two days later near the beach and gave them battle. This attack surprised the Saxons, having only faced poorly weaponed farmers up until then.

Constantine, jumping off his horse, came at them in expert fashion, his blade working its way through their bodies one by one, killing six in all.

By the end of it, none were left.

This was his first victory, but not much of one his detractors said later.

Compared to what was happening in Gaul and the threats facing Britain, his small victory over the raiders wasn't anything to celebrate.

He needed to stop the Saxon King responsible for these threats if he wanted to preserve the Empire.

This King's name was Aella, an Anglian in actuality who managed to win support among the Saxon people, leading both tribes in an alliance to bring down the Arthurian Empire.

While Aella never set foot in Britain yet, reports from the continent suggested he was amassing a large invasion fleet which would be bigger than even Hengist and Horsa managed in the time of Aurelius and Uther.

To make matters worse, the Gaulish High King, a Frank named Chlothar, was considering switching his loyalty to Aella in the face of his growing power.

If such a thing happened it would mean the loss of Gaul, cutting Britain off from mainland Europe and leaving her exposed to an invasion from both Gaul and Germania.

Something she could not possibly survive.

Chapter 2: The White Dragon Awakens

For centuries no single Saxon leader had risen to become King of all Saxon tribes, the closest in recent memory was Cheldric who fell against Arthur.

Cheldric was High King among the tribes, a King of Kings, but even he was never able to unite them into a single unified force.

This changed in 585, a few months after Arthur's death. A young noble of the Angle tribe named Aella, son of a minor King named Ylfe, and his three brothers, Cymen, Wiencing, and Cissa, somehow managed to unite the Saxons into one nation.

Whether by warfare or diplomacy is unknown, but considering how independent and free spirited the Saxon tribes were, its likely Aella used force to bring about the unification of his people.

The crest of Aella's family was a White Dragon and he used it to design a national flag of sorts for the Saxon Kingdom, which he had carried into every battle thereafter.

Its not known when the new Saxon King started meeting with the nobles and Kings of other peoples, he made sure to keep these things under wraps for obvious reasons, but early 586 is a good estimate as this is also when his raids into Gaul

intensified.

The High King of Gaul, Chlothar, is known to have met with Aella at the Roman city of Cologne in January of 586 where he was treated to a great feast while the two Kings discussed politics and military affairs.

From what little we know Aella wasn't shy of admitting he wanted Britain for himself. He cared little for the Empire as a whole (surprising considering how much land and resources it held), his eyes set on expanding his people's lands instead.

For his part Chlothar wanted independence from the Empire and a chance to rule on his own terms (even though he already had plenty of autonomy then, being allowed to create and pass laws unhindered, collect tax revenue, judge law cases and so on) and saw in the Saxon King a possibility for that.

And if one thinks that Chlothar being a Christian would prevent him from creating an alliance with a Pagan like Aella, a man who claimed direct descent from Woden, the Allfather, think again.

Chlothar didn't care what the man's personal religious beliefs were, all he cared about was if the Saxon King could deliver on his promises to rid Gaul of its Arthurian shackles, to which Aella assured him he could.

According to Ammianus Marcellinus, a Syrian soldier who was stationed in Britain at the time and served under Constantine and who later wrote several books on his experiences around this period, Chlothar and Aella cemented their alliance by marriage. Chlothar giving one of his daughters, Oda, to Aella to prove his seriousness.

In return Aella led a force of Saxons and Angles in an invasion of Gaul, destroying several Imperial held forts and killing over six hundred people, weakening the Arthurian grip on Gaul but, by design, made sure to leave Chlothar blameless, his treachery only being revealed later.

It was around this same time that Melehan, becoming overcome with jealousy and hatred at the thought of Constantine, not even a true Pendragon in his eyes (his father Cador being an adoptive son of Uther Pendragon) taking the throne while his family was ignored, began plotting in secret.

Once Constantine had been selected to become the next ruler of the Empire, Merlin relinquished the title Count of Britain with relief, not sticking around for the coronation preparations.

Instead he and Melehan made their way back to Wales where the elderly Druid wished to continue teaching his students

and finish the final volumes of his history of Arthur's reign.

His academy was flourishing, having produced two generations of Druids since its founding in 520, among them the great Bard Talhaearn, one of the foremost genealogists in all of Wales and a Court poet during Arthur's lifetime.

In the current class, Melissa was the one who showed the most promise. Dedicated to her studies and devoted to Christianity, Melissa was a rare breed, a Christian who appreciated the Magical Arts and the Otherworld's power, something Merlin treasured and wished to expand on, hoping to bring in more Christian students in time.

He was even prepared to offer Melissa a permanent place by his side as a teacher once she graduated, not wanting to lose such a remarkable and gifted student.

Merlin made the mistake of discussing this with Melehan on the way home, asking him what he thought on the topic.

Melehan played along, speaking nothing but praise about Melissa, saying she was special and the Gods surely sent her to them for a purpose.

Inside he was thinking something entirely different.

This new revelation by his master was the final straw. First he lost his rights to put a claim forward for the throne, now he was to be outranked by a woman?

Merlin went too far for Melehan this time, there was just no other way around it.

The old man needed to be taught a lesson.

Two days later, while they rested beside a stream to collect some water, Melehan made as if to go hunting for venison to cook for that night's supper.

In reality he was going to go off, circle back around, and shoot the old Druid in the back of the head with an arrow.

He'd dress it up of course, make it look like a Saxon war party somehow found them, attacked, killed Merlin, and drove him off into the hills.

It was perfect.

So off Melehan went running over the hill, never even hesitating in what he planned to do to his Master, the man who treated him like a son more than his own father had when he was alive.

He let five minutes pass before returning to the hilltop, nocking an arrow.

Merlin was by the stream like he left him, staring off into the distance, contemplating the future no doubt.

Aiming for the back of his neck Melehan fired, arrow flying down into the old Druid's flesh, driving him into the flowing

water, turning it red instantly.

Rushing down Melehan jumped into the water beside the body, only to discover Merlin wasn't dead yet.

His Master stared in disbelief at him.

Melehan, as if regretting what he did, cradled Merlin in his lap, resting the elderly head on his knees.

What Merlin's final words were can never truly be known. Melehan later claimed his Master placed the academy in his care but, as we saw here (and as we shall see later) such a thing is surely lies.

It seems to me that if Merlin said anything at all concerning the fate of the academy it was to place it in Inogen's hands. She was his only child and besides him was the most capable Druid.

Taking his Master's body to the nearest village, Melehan sent a messenger to Camelot to announce the murder, masking it as Saxon work.

Too busy to come himself, Constantine asked those closest to him and who knew Merlin if they'd go retrieve the body while he sent word to Inogen.

Melora volunteered to go and set off with a small escort the next day, arriving at the village within three.

With the Princess came Galahad and another young Knight named Percival, a distant relative of the Pendragons and youngest son of Pellinore, a Knight of the Round Table who died at Camlann.

Percival was the last of his family, his elder seven brothers all dying at Camlann with their father and his mother dying of a broken heart soon thereafter.

He offered to go with Melora out of respect for the Druid and to prove himself a fitting escort, feeling inadequate as a rookie.

Melehan, as can be expected, feigned grief, bawling like a child in his cousin's arms, Melora doing her best to comfort him.

The village Chief welcomed the Princess and her entourage inside his home, his wife preparing a simple meal for them as Melora questioned Melehan further on what happened to Merlin.

The apprentice did his best to whip up a story on the fly, taking great pangs to point out the Saxon hand in his Master's murder.

When Melora asked what became of the war party, Melehan said he didn't know, but that they probably escaped back to their ships.

To this the Princess seemed bothered, then she confirmed it by stating as much. She grew tired of Saxon raiders striking villages and lone travellers, as much as she wished it wouldn't happen, she almost prayed for the real invasion to begin so then, at least, they could deal with the enemy properly.

As it was, they all needed to wait while Constantine scrambled to bring in reinforcements from across the Empire, strengthen the Imperial presence in Gaul, and secure the loyalties of nobles in Britain.

While the loyalty of the Kings of Scotland and Wales was assured, nobles within their respective Kingdoms, as well as in Loegria, was less certain. Most seemed dependable enough, but Constantine needed to make sure.

Once the meal was finished everyone retired for the night, Melora and her men continuing the conversation in their own hut the Chieftain gave them.

The next morning the Knights and the Princess took Merlin's body back to Camelot while Melehan pressed on to Anglesey where he was to break the news to his fellow students.

While this happened in Loegria, events in the North were unfolding which would end in chaos and bloodshed.

Valentinus, according to Marcellinus, was born in 544 in the

province of Pannonia, which today makes up parts of Hungary, Slovakia, Austria, Croatia, Serbia, and Bosonia. into a minor noble family of Armenian descent.

While his immediate family was minor in terms of status, their ancestry was by no means 'small', as he was a direct descendant of Arsaces I of Parthia, King of Persia in the 4th Century BC, and had several other royal ancestors.

Valentinus joined the legions on his eighteenth birthday and by the time he found himself in Britain he was a Prefact of his own legion, stationed along Hadrian's Wall.

While a high ranking officer in his own right Valentinus answered to another, a Romanized German named Fullofaudes, who was Duke of Britain, a non noble title which was, in actuality, the highest rank on the island in military terms, only outranked by the King.

Not much can be said of Fullofaudes, not even his tribal origins, though considering many Germanic peoples, including Saxons and Angles as well as Jutes and Frisians, had been living peacefully in Britain since the days of Aurelius Pendragon, it seems a safe guess to say he was a native Briton and born into one of these communities.

Fullofaudes worked with an another officer in the defense of Britain, Count Nectaridus, a Briton of Greek descent who's

own rise to power, like Fullofaudes, is not known, who looked after the defense of the British coastline.

Both men were trusted and prized by Constantine, especially in the early and often uncertain days of his reign.

The same can not be said of Valentinus. The man was known, to put it mildly, to entertain criminal elements within his legion and, according to Marcellinus, the reason why he was placed in Britain in the first place was due to the Imperial Court wanting to keep a closer eye on him, which could possibly be a hint at rebellion or a desire to rebel.

Its known Valentinus held himself in high regard, believing his royal blood gave him a special status other men did not have, but there's no evidence to suggest he was openly mocking of the Pendragons or saw them as unworthy upstarts.

In the early months of 586 Valentinus stayed in the North on the border with Scotland, but by July he is recorded as out of country.

Sent to Gaul by Constantine to help squash Saxon raiders there, Valentinus completed his task in relatively little time but instead of returning to Britain he met up with his brother in law Maximinus, who worked under the Gaulish High King as a Lawyer.

Maximinus, in the words of Ammianus Marcellinus, was a

'wild beast.' A man of low morals who used his position of power to persecute his enemies and strike down those who displeased his Master regardless of whether they were innocent, which was most of the time, or not.

It should be of little surprise then when we discover Valentinus met him in Paris to discuss meeting with Aella, Maximinus bringing his brother in law into the secret conspiracy between Chlothar and the Saxon King.

What was said between them can never be known but the Prefect agreed to join the alliance and soon afterwards went to Germania to Saxon territory where he was warmly received by Aella.

The two talked well into the night about what the King wanted to achieve and what Valentinus could hope to gain if he joined him. Aella promised him a throne of his own, the throne of Britain, if he would help him destroy the Empire.

Valentinus accepted this offer and the Saxon leader assured him there were no strings attached, all he needed to do was accept him as overlord and allow Saxons and other Germanic peoples to settle there.

He cautioned the Prefect not to act yet, to wait until he found more allies, but while he waited for his signal he should meet with the Pictish King in Scotland and see if he could convince

him to join their confederacy.

This Valentinus agreed to do and the two parted, the Prefect returning to Britain, the King shifting his focus on raiding Roman territory.

Once back in Britain Valentinus wasted no time in going into Scotland where he met with Nechtan, the King of the Picts.

Nechtan was the son of Garnait and grandson of Aidan Mac Gabran, making him a Prince of Scotland as well as the Pictish King. He was also, before the election of Constantine, a contender for the British throne, even if a remote one.

Nechtan, unlike his grandfather, was not loyal to the Arthurian Empire or its ideals. All he cared about was his own power and expanding it, therefore when he met with Valentinus in the Fortress of Fortriu and learned of the conspiracy, he jumped at the chance, offering troops when the time came.

With the Pictish King in on the conspiracy Valentinus wrote back to his brother in law and then, in secret, went to several officers in the garrisons around Britain offering large sums of money for their loyalty. All accepted, and the Duke and Count were none the wiser of it.

Still, more allies were needed, and so Valentinus kept looking.

Upon his return to Anglesey Melehan told the Druids that Merlin was dead, killed by a Saxon arrow in an ambush.

Rocked by the news it quickly turned into debates on what to do next, and what would happen to the academy now that their master was gone.

To this Melehan announced his accession to Head Master, promoting the lie that Merlin named him as his successor.

Most accepted this without question, but a few, including Melissa, weren't convinced. Melissa in particular knew Merlin wasn't confident in Melehan's abilities to lead the Druids, but she chose not to speak up.

She took her leave that night, slipping out while all were asleep, and headed to Camelot to offer her services to the Emperor, wanting to help in any way she could with the Saxon threat.

Melehan, enraged by her 'escape', did not go after her. He stayed in Wales to strengthen his control over the Academy and he called for Melou and their mother to join him in Britain, wishing to have his family together again and redeem themselves in the eyes of the British people.

Constantine accepted Melissa into his Court and she became his Seer, a position Merlin once held for Arthur, and this proved crucial in the year ahead as she foresaw all the

possibilities that could befall him, but, for some unknown reason, she did not detect or sense Valentinus' treachery, or perhaps, as these things go, she was warned not to tell as some things are predetermined by the Gods.

Whatever the case, by 587, Aella was ready and sent a message to Valentinus.

With this letter in hand the Prefect ordered Nechtan to assemble his warriors and sent a messenger to Ireland to the High King Aed Mac Ainmuirech, whom he made an ally during the past year, to prepare his invasion fleet.

A month later Pictish warriors streamed into Loegria, thousands of Irish crossed over to land in Scotland, and a fleet of Saxon ships under Aella and his brothers sailed across the English channel from Gaul.

The invasion of the Empire's heartland had begun.

The initial battles were all in favor of the rebels and invaders, hundreds of Imperial soldiers dying by their blades. Sudden and chaotic, their attacks brought Arthurian Britain to its knees in a matter of weeks.

Constantine and the Knights of the Round Table did their best to keep morale up among the people and the nobility, but even in their own ranks they began to lose heart.

Another fleet arrived a month after Aella's, landing in what is now Sussex under Chlothar who led an army comprised of both Saxons and Franks, quickly linking up with Aella's men and together they fought the Imperial forces under Constantine, Melora, and Orlando at the Battle of Mercredesburne outside what is now the village of Ashbourneham in South Sussex.

Prior to this battle Aella and Chlothar had killed hundreds of Britons in their rampage across Sussex, burning villages to the ground and slaughtering their people. Aella's aim was to drive out or exterminate the native population so his tribesmen could take their place. As they did this Valentinus and Nechtan fought in the North with the Irish High King, defeating Duke Fullofaudes, Aidan Mac Gabran and his son and heir, Arthur, in several battles.

For Constantine and his forces Mercredesbourne was important, not only in halting the carnage, but also to show the British and other citizens of the Empire that there was hope.

Unfortunately for Constantine this did not go to plan. His forces were crushed, thousands dying and many others captured, later to be sacrificed to Woden and the Aesir.

What won the day for the Saxons and their allies was their berserker warriors. Both Saxons and Franks had these types of

men in their ranks, Shamans who wore Bear and Wolf furs in battle who worked themselves into frenzied states and threw themselves into the fighting line, heedless of danger.

Feared for this very reason, the berserkers did the most damage to the British lines, decimating it and driving the Emperor and his Generals back, forcing a retreat.

The defeat at Mercredesburne ensured Constantine lost Sussex to the invaders.

To make matters worse, Nectaridus was killed in the battle, leaving his position vacant and no time to fill it, opening the coasts up for more invasion possibilities.

In the North Fullofaudes and Scottish King continued to suffer defeats, Valentinus proving to be an able General in the field.

In the Battle of the Miathi, named after the Pictish tribe that took part in it against the Scots and Britons, Arthur Mac Aidan and his younger brother Bran fell, leaving Aidan distraught and unable to continue leading the war effort.

Alone against the Picts and Irish Fullofaudes did the best he could, but it wasn't enough. Like Nectaridus the Duke of Britain fell in battle soon after Constantine's defeat in Sussex, but where and exactly when he died is unknown.

With two of his best officers dead and the invaders gaining more victories, Constantine faced an uncertain future. Some

of his advisors suggested he run away, escape across the sea and find refuge with one of his governors and raise an army to take Britain back eventually. Others said he should surrender and seek terms. Some, voicing the opinion of many too scared to speak, even said he did not deserve the crown and should abdicate.

He was not willing to do any of these.

Then Melissa offered a fourth option, one which did appeal to the Emperor.

She suggested he contact Avalon and ask for aid from its Queen.

Chapter 3: The Elven Queen's Gift

In the year following Arthur's death Vivian, the Queen of Avalon, died and was succeeded by an Elf named Argante.

Not much is known of Argante's background or family history. That she was not related to Vivian, who was a Fairy, is clear.

The English historian Layamon calls her a radiant Elf, meaning beautiful, a common trait of Elves of either gender. How she

came to power is just as murky, but it gives credence to Avalon having an elective form of monarchy rather than an hereditary one.

Using her Magic Melissa summoned Argante on the same Lake Blaise took Uther years before, which leads one to assume it was a natural 'gateway' between the Otherworld and the mortal plane.

Here the Elven Queen discussed the trouble the Empire found itself in with Constantine, the Emperor unsure what to do.

What the people needed, she said, was reassurance that he was the right man for the job. Not just the nobles, but all the people to whom he served.

To this Constantine asked how he could prove such a thing?

The Queen smiled, requesting to speak with Melissa alone, to wish Constantine reluctantly agreed to and walked off.

When Melissa found him later she carried Excalibur in her hand wrapped in linen cloth. She gave it to him and told him Argante's terms.

Like Arthur he was to honour the Old Ways and respect the various Pagan faiths in the Empire, not favoring Christianity or any other religion. Upon his death, like Arthur promised, he was to deliver Excalibur back to the Lake where she or another would be waiting to receive it.

The sword was a gift, but one not freely given. Constantine swore to uphold religious tolerance and with Excalibur in hand returned to Camelot to organize a new campaign.

Meanwhile in the North Valentinus conquered what is now modern Northumbria and moved to meet up with his Master, joining Aella and Chlothar in subdueing modern day Essex.

In what is now Hampshire Aella, Valentinus, and Chlothar attacked the fort of Anderida, an old fortress built in the Roman Era where a large host of Britons had taken refuge against their onslaught.

The British held the enemies off for as long as they could but in the end their gates gave way, their walls collapsed, and the Saxons, Franks, and Picts poured in.

According to the Anglo Saxon Chronicles, a record complied from older ones during the reign of Alfred the Great of Wessex, not one Briton was left alive after Aella and his fellow Commanders were finished. They torched the fort after the slaughter.

The fall of Anderida meant Hampshire was in danger of being added to Aella's list of conquests, and another battle against the British a few days later all but sealed it, and he moved on to Camelot itself.

In all of this chaos Melehan, leaving Anglesey with Melou, saw

his opportunity to win back their family's lost status and arranged a meeting with Aella where he and his younger brother offered their loyalty in exchange for estates and noble titles in his new Kingdom.

Melehan's betrayal was a hard blow to Constantine, both in terms of the Druid's status as Head of the academy, but it also confirmed what rumour and whisper had been saying for awhile about Merlin's true manner of death.

While Constantine and the Knights of the Round Table struggled to raise the force necessary to defeat the invaders, a new wave of Saxons arrived under the command of a War Chief named Porta and his two sons Beda and Mela, landing at Portsmouth where they raided the town and killed the elder's young son.

With Britain seemingly crumbling around him Constantine did the only thing he could do, whether it was sound or not. He formed the largest army he could muster, thousands strong pulled from the various parts of his Empire and included Ammianus Marcellinus among its ranks, as well as Galahad and Percival and Melora and Orlando, as well as Thomas, Kyden, Patrick, Morgan and Mervin.

Riding at the head of this massive force from the gates of Camelot Constantine Pendragon swore a vow to God before he left, either to crush Aella and his warriors or die in the

defense of his realm.

The first major move of this new campaign was the march on London, currently under siege by Porta and his sons. Constantine, Excalibur's Magical aura glowing as he drew it, managed to defeat the War Chief's forces, driving them back and securing the future capital of Britain for the Empire.

Once London was safe the Emperor established a temporary base there with his Knights. In London he divided his army and sent each division in a different direction to harass the various invader forces, hoping this 'hammering' would hurt them in ways a full frontal campaign wouldn't.

In this he had great success, hurting the Pictish forces so much in fact that Nechtan, in a great reversal, sued for peace mere weeks later, forgetting his loyalty to Aella, fearing for his life.

Constantine respected Aidan's authority in Scotland and so sent Nechtan back to the North where his grandfather severely punished him, but spared him death, already losing too many family members to it.

The next move Constantine took was a controversial one, one which many in his Court opposed. He granted amnesty to any rebel who threw down their arms then and there, surrendering to Imperial authority.

Hundreds took it, but why is not so clear. By all accounts Aella

and his forces were winning, had won most of the battles in the war so far, but yet hundreds of rebel Britons, whether they be Scots, Loegrians, or Welshmen, gave up and accepted Constantine's offer. Perhaps they grew sick of what the invaders did, perhaps they realized the hell they unleashed upon their homeland, whatever their reasons many joined the Imperial forces.

This sudden turn of events and loss of allies did not dampen Aella's spirits much. He continued his war of conquest, defeating the British at the Battle of Fretherne where his brother Cymen was killed. This victory allowed him to take several villages and lots of plunder to fund his war efforts.

The Battle of Fretherne was followed up by the Battle of Wanborough where Aella fought the forces of Lancelot and Galahad. This too was a Saxon victory and it was what the Anglo Saxon Chronicles called 'a great slaughter' of the Britons.

This loss shattered Lancelot, the elderly Knight retiring to Bamburgh Castle where he would live out the rest of his days, dying in 589 of natural causes.

His son, however, kept on fighting with Constantine and thankfully for the British Wanborough proved to be the last major victory for Aella in the war.

By the end of the year much of Britain had been restored to Imperial rule, the towns returned to their leaders, and the Saxons and Franks on the defensive, with Chlothar surrendering soon after, being granted mercy by the King and sent back to Gaul under the guard of Melora and Orlando, the two staying there to watch over him for the next several years.

Constantine drove Aella and Valentinus into Scotland, killing scores of their men, forcing them to retreat up into the Highlands, but here is where a stalemate ensued and lasted until the last months of 588.

In these months Aella was suddenly assassinated by Valentinus who wanted total control of the army. In order to lead his troops back down into the lowlands to 'rebound', he tried bribing lowlander Chieftains with the aid of Melehan and Melou, only to be rebuked by these men who informed Constantine of this change in rebel/invader leadership.

The Emperor wasted no time in marching up into the Highlands of Scotland and in a grueling campaign that lasted three long months he and Valentinus faced each other for the final time.

Hopping from Glen to Glen and forest to forest, the Imperial army slowly cut down the rebels, until the last battle where Constantine and the Knights of the Round Table destroyed the

last of Valentinus's army, capturing the traitorous noble.

Sent back to Camelot to await trial for treason, Constantine did not return South just yet, he still wanted to take down two more threats.

Melehan and Melou.

The two sons of Mordred fled the final battlefield, rushing to the safety of a Pagan Temple close by, Constantine tracking them down himself.

Entering the Temple the Successor to Arthur did not listen to their pleas, there was no more room for mercy.

In two clean strikes he split their skulls open, their blood spraying on the altar.

Sheathing Excalibur Constantine left and headed for home, finally able to put his mind at ease.

Valentinus was brought up on charges for treason, found guilty in court before the Emperor and his Knights, and senteneced to death, which was carried out soon thereafter by beheading.

Constantine Pendragon's victory in repelling the Saxon King's forces solidified his rule as King of Britain and Emperor of Rome, squashing any opposition to his authority from then on.

Like Merlin hoped upon choosing him for the throne, Constantine would continue the Golden Age his uncle started, and many of the most famous tales of Arthurian Legend happenned during his reign, but these are stories for another time.